

Editorial: Coto single-handedly reforms water district

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With a stroke of the governor's pen this week, good-government reforms long overdue at the Santa Clara Valley Water District have become law, thanks to the foresight and tenacity of San Jose Assemblyman Joe Coto.

The district's elected board could have established better practices on its own — policies as simple as posting meeting agendas early enough for the public to see what was happening. But its entrenched leaders, several of whom have been there more than 20 years, did not. So when Coto was asked to carry a bill for them on another matter, he said sure, as long as reform was part of the deal.

In recent years, the Mercury News and the county civil grand jury have shone a light on problems at the district, which is in charge of flood control and supplying drinking water for most of the county.

One particular outrage, when a board member was hired for a highly paid staff job, finally got the public's attention.

Coto's reforms include new rules on hiring and on lobbyist activity — and they give the public a better shot at serious oversight, which is badly needed.

Far-reaching new reforms become law for Santa Clara Valley Water District

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The largest drinking water provider in Santa Clara County will be required to adopt nearly a dozen reforms, from more open records to limits on revolving-door hiring, under a new state law.

The measure, AB 466, signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger late Sunday night, ushers in some of the most significant changes to the way that the Santa Clara Valley Water District has been governed since its creation in 1968.

“I was just ecstatic,” said Assemblyman Joe Coto, D-San Jose, who wrote the law in response to controversy in recent years over the district’s spending and management. “The people who work at the water district do an excellent job. But it is important for the members of the board to demonstrate good, clean government, and open government because water is such a critical part of our lives.”

One of the largest local government agencies in Silicon Valley, the 769-employee water district provides drinking water and flood protection to 1.8 million people in Santa Clara County. As the primary water wholesaler in the county, it sells water to 13 retail water providers such as the San Jose Water Company and cities from Los Altos to Gilroy, which in turn deliver it to customers.

The water district has been rattled by several controversies in recent years, including approving salaries to its managers higher than those at most other California water agencies.

Last year, former water district CEO Stan Williams was pressured to resign after he hired then-board member Greg Zlotnick to a newly created, \$184,000-a-year job at the district without advertising the position or telling board members.

During Williams’ tenure, the district’s staff grew 46 percent — from 541 people in 1994 to 789 in 2005 — according to an audit by the Santa Clara County civil grand jury. Salaries for the district’s top 33 managers averaged \$152,000, the grand jury found in a 2006 report.

As Williams was leaving, the board voted to increase his pay from \$233,000 to \$250,000, retroactive to 2006. As a result, Williams’ retirement benefits increased by roughly \$7,500 a year to about \$112,000.

Meanwhile, over the past 10 years, the agency has doubled the “pump tax,” the fee it charges city water agencies and farmers to pump groundwater for drinking and irrigation.